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# California

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Short Fiction: The Visual Literary Journal

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## **Anthony Caleshu**

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### **CALIFORNIA**

Barely out of his garage, Chas wished he'd walked. A walk would've taken him out the back door and through the winding woods to Lincoln College and not into the path of Hey Jude. Hey Jude stood at the end of the driveway, in his black suit with his black bag of knives. The boy was looking toward the giant oak that Chas had planted with his kids years ago; it now cast a shadow in the summer sun over most of the front lawn. Under the oak, Chas had knocked a 'House For Sale' sign lopsidedly into the ground. He rolled down his car window.

'You selling your house?' Hey Jude asked him.

'You want to buy it?' Chas said.

Chas had put the sign up knowing the boy's mother, Judy Moody would phone Sally. Judy Moody was 'a woman so narcissistic she named her boy after herself,' he'd once said to Sally. 'Jude is named after Judy's father,' Sally had returned.

'Where you moving?' Hey Jude said.

'California,' Chas lied. He wasn't moving anywhere.

The boy cocked his head, a vaguely autistic grin on his face.

'Mrs. Hanson and Ali too?'

'Of course,' Chas replied.

He wondered what Sally had told Judy and what Judy had told her son. Before Sally left last week, she'd bought a set of steak knives from the boy while he sat eating left-over lasagna at their table; their daughter Ali walked in, sneered at the boy, then walked out of the room.

‘Are they home, now?’ Hey Jude asked.

‘They’ve gone down the Cape for the weekend,’ Chas said. At least part of which was true. His wife had taken their daughter for the whole of the summer. Sally had called it a ‘trial separation’.

Jude put his head in Chas’s window and studied the dashboard.

‘I’ll give you \$500 for the car,’ Jude said,

Chas lowered his Ray Ban’s.

‘What? It’s got 160,000 miles on it. It won’t make it across the country.’

Despite Sally’s objections, Chas had bought the old Mercedes 8 months ago on e-bay for \$1200. It was pale yellow (‘puke yellow,’ Sally had called it). Over the past few months he’d discovered it needed a new muffler, new shocks, new tires, probably a new radiator. He imagined Sally and him cruising through the cornfields of Iowa, the jagged cliffs of the Badlands, the forests of the Pacific Northwest as they’d once done, years ago, before the kids were born.

‘I’m putting it on a train.’

‘A train?’

‘It’ll be there in San Francisco waiting for me,’ Chas said.

The boy nodded in confirmation, as if he’d mapped out the 3500 miles in his head.

‘Where you going now?’ he asked.

‘Supermarket,’ Chas said. He wasn’t going to the supermarket.

‘Could I get a ride?’

‘Where to?’

‘Wherever you’re going.’

‘Actually, I need to stop at the college for a while,’ Chas said.

‘Perfect, I’ve a few customers up the hill who are always in need of quality knives,’ Hey Jude said, and he ran around to the passenger’s side and let himself in.

Out the window, the boy dangled his arm as they drove. Occasionally, he replaced his hand with his head; like a dog, catching the wind in his face.

Chas imagined driving the 1 and ½ hours down the Cape to see Sally despite her saying she didn’t want to see him. Their daughter Ali would be at the beach. He’d walk under the pergola, knock on the door of the cottage she’d inherited a couple of years back when her father died.

The car behind him blasted its horn and he turned right toward the college he’d been teaching at for almost 20 years.

‘Here you go,’ Chas said to the boy, dropping him off at the corner.

‘I could do you a good deal on a block of Chef knives,’ he said, ‘they can cut through a tin can. Mrs. Hanson almost lost a finger during the demo.’

‘I’ll tell her when I see her,’ Chas said.

When he looked in his rear view mirror, the boy was still standing in the middle of the road watching him drive through the campus gates.

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The College was staging yet another fund-raising weekend. This time targeting the most recent graduates with kegs on the quad and games of beer pong. Banners for the classes of 2013, 2014, and last year’s 2015 hung from three marquis on the quad. Alumni in khaki shorts and checked polo shirts were everywhere. Their SUVs and convertibles occupied all the available spaces. He rounded the library, to the spaces-that-weren’t-really-spaces behind his office at McConickle. Once the grand home of James McConickle, patriot and early president of Lincoln College, the building had formerly housed admissions but had been transformed into the Art Department, with

studios on the ground floor and offices above them. The white wraparound porch was rotten and sagging and an old hammock hung limply in the corner.

He parked the yellow Mercedes between two mature trees, and quickly let himself in McConickle's front door. He locked it after him, then unlocked it since it would be awkward for Holly to have to knock and for him to have to come down to let her in when he was expecting her.

He ran up the stairs and hung his linen sport jacket on the back of his office door. Holly wouldn't be there until 5:00. He powered on his desktop. He had received the occasional email from Holly since she'd graduated last year, but the phone call was a surprise. He had never been good on the phone, unable to gauge when to talk and when to listen and so was constantly interrupting the person on the other line, or else staying silent for those uncomfortable seconds too long. Holly filled the phone with a stream of talk about Paris, where she'd been living in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement for the past six months. She had the sort of wealth that meant she was over-familiar with him, even as a student, walking into his office without an appointment to tell him about sailing in the Carribean or to ask if he thought her skirt was too short. When she'd graduated, he'd sat across from her in the student bar and felt a pang in his chest when she ran off to play Frisbee with a floppy-haired Zeta Psi.

His office was still a mess from the semester. He ran downstairs for some plastic recycling bags. He made piles and then more piles, heaps of paper: print-outs of various administrative memos, teaching notes and drafts of student essays which he couldn't remember marking and which, for some reason, he'd never handed back. He fit them all in three green recycling bags before sitting back down at his desk with a copy of the Lincoln alumni news. He read the interview with himself, stopping when he got to the point where he said, 'Figurative art, especially sculpture, is necessary now

more than ever. We're losing touch with the body. The body is almost an abstraction. We don't touch each other anymore.'

Since Sally had left him, he hadn't eaten properly and he could feel his stomach acid stirring, bringing up bile from his gut to his throat. He took a swig from the Pepto bottle on his desk and began making a tower of books, which he stacked on the floor next to the armchair in the corner. He knew to let Holly navigate their conversation: life after college, waiting tables in Buenos Aires, surfing in Perth, partying in Rome with three Shieks from Dubai who, she'd told him on the phone, had invited her to take up residence at the Burj Al Arab.

A band had started up and his old office windows rattled from the bass. He looked toward the quad, separated from the back of McConickle by a line of century-old oaks. In the winter, he could see through the trees, but now they were full with green and so only spots of sunlight broke through. He opened the window. From up here, the roof and hood of his car looked almost dandelion gold in the sun.

It wasn't even worth the \$500 Hey Jude had offered him.

He glanced at his watch; not yet 5:00, more than half an hour before Holly would show up, if she showed up. She was coming to the reunion from the City, and there was every chance she'd stumble into something *unmissable* – an offer to go hot-air ballooning, or to have her portrait painted by some up-and-coming artist featured in a show at Gagosian.

He pulled a book on the Vorticists from his shelf. Holly had written her dissertation on the Vorticists. He slumped in the armchair, an original Eames, and put his feet up on the ottoman-- they'd found it in an antique store in Vermont. Sally had had it reupholstered in deep chocolate leather, a gift she'd given him when he'd gotten tenure so many years back. The ottomon's base was wonky, and during a tutorial, Holly

had once straddled it and looked him dead in the eyes as he sat back in the chair and tried to explain the difference between sand-casting and the lost-wax process.

He placed the catalogue from his recent show on top of the tower of books next to the armchair. He opened the window, and imagined that on the other side of the trees there was a heaving crowd listening to the music coming from the quad. He imagined drinking beer in a plastic cup. He felt like a beer in a plastic cup.

He walked onto the quad and into the flush of four or five hundred recent graduates. A beer pong tournament had been organized by Delta Kappa Delta and, without so much as a breeze, players hit ping-pong balls to rise and splash into the foamy heads of their beers. He manoeuvred into a beer-truck's long line. Everyone in front of him had blue rubber bands around their wrists, and he remembered reading something about the need for the blue rubber bands to be served at the beer-trucks. A wave of anonymity unsettled him. He began walking across the quad, heading toward the library, which he knew to be closed.

He was almost to the other side, when he heard someone say, 'Professor Hanson!'

Four former students with 2013 badges circled him. Introductions were made with names he assured them he remembered. One went off for beers and the other three responded to his question about what they were doing now: law-school, law school, investment banking.

'People have to make money to buy art,' he said.

They laughed. He was not only remembered, but remembered well.

The girl in the group, Sophia – with a dark bob and freckles over a sunburnt nose – said she didn't have a creative bone in her body. She said she'd once accidentally sat in on the first seminar of his sophomore Studio Practice module by mistake, and, 'what's worse,' had taken notes because she was too embarrassed to sit there doing

nothing. He thought to say something about how the students who thought themselves the most uncreative were often the most. He was in the middle of saying she was the only student who ever bothered to take notes, when out of the corner of his eye, Hey Jude approached with a beer in each hand. Beer sloshed onto the boy's black suit. He smiled widely, showing off neglected teeth and a thick tongue.

'Finished your shopping?' Hey Jude asked him loudly.

'We live on the same street,' Chas explained to the alumni.

Hey Jude gulped beer from his right hand's cup.

'Easy with that,' Chas said, 'You've got to get through two.'

The others laughed and the boy raised his hand to show the blue rubber wristband declaring 'Lincoln Alumni 2015'.

'You're all getting younger and younger,' said Chas.

The group laughed again.

'I'll give you \$600 for the car,' the boy blurted out.

'You're selling your car?' Sophia said.

'He's moving to California.'

'California!' they all exclaimed.

'California!' the boy repeated, sharing their excitement and holding aloft both his beers as if they were trophies.

To stop the boy from speaking, Chas spoke slowly, vaguely, about how careers evolve. He said that institutional pressures and making art didn't always go hand in hand. He referred to the need for time, which was the greatest luxury – not money, not titles – the need for time and space so makers could make.

'I've read how California keeps poaching from the Northeast. Especially Stanford. And Berkeley,' Sophia said.

Chas took a drink from his beer.



‘Berkeley,’ he said with a smile.

‘Congratulations,’ they all said.

‘Berkeley,’ he said again, this time without reverence, as if he’d been saying it all of his life, as if he believed it.

‘You’ll love the West,’ Sophia said.

‘He’s selling the house,’ Hey Jude interrupted.

‘But not the car!’ Chas said.

Everybody but the boy laughed.

‘I moved to Boulder a couple of years ago. If you’re driving out, you should stop in,’ she played with the lace hem of her pink skirt.

‘The last time I headed West,’ Chas said, ‘was the worst month of my life.’

And then he told them something true. Of 20 years ago when he and Sally were travelling cross-country in a VW van, on their way to San Diego where she’d been offered a fellowship to study dolphins. They’d had a fight in Montana, and he’d pulled the keys out of the van as she was negotiating the corkscrew curves that wound down Glacier National Park. When she slammed on the brakes, they flipped, coming down on the guard-rail.

The alumni laughed again. He didn’t mention that after almost twenty years of marriage, he and Sally were now separating, or separated – he didn’t know which verb to use.

They were all still talking, when Holly ran up behind him and said, ‘You’re supposed to be waiting for me.’

He took the surprise with confidence, without hesitation. She was wearing flip-flops and a short white skirt; her pale blue t-shirt had a bubblegum pink image of Serena Williams doing an overhead slam. A lime green tennis ball was about to be smashed from the center of Holly’s right breast.

‘It’s good to see you,’ he said.

‘I’ve got to meet someone,’ she said, ‘before I meet you.’

‘But we’ve just met,’ he said.

‘See you in ten minutes?’ she said, ‘At your office. Unless you’d rather stay here?’

‘Sure,’ he said, ‘McConickle, like we said.’

‘Good,’ she said, ‘Because missing our appointment would have been a big mistake.’

He smiled when she walked away, and he resisted telling the alumni who surrounded him that she was an old student etc etc.

‘We’ll be at Pi Phi later. *Martinis and Mixers*, if you’re interested. Bring your friend if you like,’ Sophia said when the conversation started to wane.

Hey Jude looked at him funny: pupils dilated, eyes wonky, wandering loose in his head.

‘\$700?!’ the boy slurred.

In the middle of their circle, the boy vomited.

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Chas held Hey Jude at the waist and walked him back through the crowd to lay down on the hammock that swung from the McConickle porch. The boy curled up in a ball and the hammock sagged and wrapped over him like a cocoon. Chas could do worse than let him sleep it off. The boy never really had a chance with a mother like Judy Moody. She’d been divorced twice and neither father had laid a claim on Jude. Her life’s pleasure was in her son whom she over-mothered. Chas imagined the boy being expelled for carrying a knife at school. The knock on his office door came suddenly:

‘Who’s the kid in the hammock?’ Holly said with a smile.

‘I saw that,’ Cam said.

‘One has to pace oneself,’ she said.

He’d forgotten just how green her eyes were; he had a tendency to close his eyes when speaking, but now kept them open, trying not to look at her legs.

‘I wondered if you were going to be here,’ she said.

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ he said.

‘After seeing you on the quad, I started wondering if we had anything to talk about once we got the pleasantries over with.’

‘Some people take up whole evenings with pleasantries,’ he said.

‘But they’re the sort who have dinner parties with *associates*. I refuse to have associates.’

She spotted *The Vorticists* book on the footstool.

‘My dissertation was so bad,’ she said, and she fell into the armchair, while he sat in the swivel chair at his desk.

‘It wasn’t that bad,’ he said.

‘Kind of you to say,’ she said. ‘But I only got an A because you liked me.’

The sun was bright in the window, he squinted his eyes.

She leaned back in the armchair and put her feet on the footstool.

The natural pause in their dialogue went on too long.

She narrowed her eyes. ‘Your office is really neat,’ she said. ‘I don’t remember it being so neat.’

She picked up the catalogue of his work on the pile of books next to the chair. ‘What’s this?’

‘My new show,’ he said, ‘just past.’

She opened it and read aloud:

*In Chas Hamilton-Hanson’s new work, the male leer is as compassionate as it is scathing. Compassionate for the woman wounded, the surgeried, the*

*slumped, the sex-less. The sculptor's instrument is not much different than the surgeon's. What does it mean to lop off a breast or to choose not to shape one?*

She raised her eyebrows.

‘That’s the gallery owner,’ he said, ‘I didn’t write it. I don’t even think it.’

She flipped through the catalogue.

‘My mother had a double mastectomy,’ she said. ‘When I was a Freshman.’ She put the book down and smiled. ‘But now she’s a perfect 34D. She divorced my father last year and began an affair with her yoga instructor. We’re going to live together in Paris in the Fall. My mother and me. Sans the yoga instructor. I love Paris in the Fall.’

Chas watched her look at him; she didn’t blink, she smiled.

Sast year, Sally had been told a lumpectomy would do, but after the chemo didn’t shrink the tumours enough, she’d lost both breasts and the lymph nodes under her right arm. The reconstruction had been complicated.

Holly looked at him with a new expression; the same way he looked at the students he felt sorry for: the dim, the friendless the ugly. She was still flipping through the gallery catalogue.

‘I like your new work. It’s very – ’

He cut her off. ‘You can have the catalogue,’ he said. ‘If you want...’

‘Really?’ she said, with the over-excitement of one used to being given things.

‘Sure,’ he said.

‘Then you’ve got to sign it,’ she said, and she stood up.

He opened the catalogue slowly. He didn’t want to see the work.

He was unsure of whether to write something or just to sign his name. He wrote something more affectionate than he’d meant to, then signed quickly before handing it back to her. She read the dedication and smiled.

‘This means a lot,’ she said. ‘You haven’t told me about the show. We’re always talking about me, I want to hear about you.’

He didn’t know what to say – something about Sally, her cancer, their separation... anything he said about himself would be about her. He hadn’t told Sally about the new work for his exhibition until after he’d finished it. Until after the chemo, after the radiation, after the surgery. When she saw the images he’d made of her – gaunt and bald -- she’d cried at first. When she saw the sculptures – breastless, with thick scars like her own – she’d pushed one of the plinths to smash on his studio floor. She’d told him she needed some time, and he gave it to her, sleeping in the spare room. She hadn’t used the word *separate* until a month ago. His vision got worse overnight. Pins and needles ran down the sides of his hands.

‘Have I told you I’m moving to California?’ he said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Tell me!’

‘I’m leaving Lincoln,’ he said. ‘For California.’

‘The gold rush is over,’ she said.

But it wasn’t. Not for him, not now.

He talked about California as if she’d never heard of California. He talked of cliffs and beaches, palm trees and sunshine. He talked about jazz and poetry. He talked of Berkeley and the Department of Art Practice – about the MFA program in ceramics, about the fierce competition in the race for a reputation. He told her that the reason the art world was so stagnant was because no one was taking risks. Postmodernity has doomed us all to thinking that all art was self-referential, lacking in any real affect beyond parody and kitsch. He said that new forms were as readily available as new lives, they just required someone to make them. ‘The future of art,’ he said, ‘is the future of the world after it’s been dissected, split open and re-stitched.’ He told her,

‘Art needs to transcend life. Especially when life is at its worst... when life sucks the most.’

She opened her eyes wide. ‘Wow,’ she said.

He felt dizzy, pale.

‘Sorry,’ he said, and he stood up too quickly, ‘I’m a little tired, I think I should probably –’.

She stood up when he sat down again. She placed his catalogue on his desk, and took the few steps until she was right in front of him.

‘When you aren’t being cynical, you’re a pretty passionate guy,’ she said. ‘It’s reminded me why I wanted to see you.’ She leaned down and kissed him.

‘I’ve wanted to do this for so long,’ she said, ‘But I’ve promised someone something. He’s had a crush on you since we were freshmen. And I told him he could have you first.’

She took his hand, as if he were a child. In his ear, she whispered: ‘He just wants to suck your cock. I’m gonna shut the window, pull the blinds, you just lean back. I’ll be over here. I’m so wet. Watch me if you want to.’

‘I’m not gay,’ he said.

‘Neither is Oliver,’ she said.

‘I’m serious,’ he said.

‘So am I,’ she said, ‘I’ve a driver downstairs. Come with us clubbing in New York tonight.’

She opened the door. The boy stood with his back against the wall. He’d been in several of Chas’s classes. Chas looked at him from the armchair, then looked at the ceiling. He tasted the faint iron of adrenalin in his mouth. There was a time when he’d imagined he’d want to stay living and teaching in Lincoln forever, but now he knew forever was in the distant past.

He looked at Holly who sat in the swivel chair. The boy moved the ottoman and got down on his knees in front of Chas. His shaved head was dark with stubble and thick, a large brow ridge. A great square back -- where the parietal bone went flat against the occipital bone, the expansive plate of the foramen magnum.

Holly sat at his desk and lifted her skirt. But Chas shut his eyes and thought of California.

'Wake up, sunshine,' Holly said, with a hand on his face when it was over.

She walked Oliver to the door.

'See you later tonight, Professor Hanson,' Oliver said.

'Don't get up,' Holly said to Chas. 'I'll be right back.'

Tomorrow, Chas would call the real estate agent. The realtor would ask him if they were selling the blinds and curtains in the house and he'd say *everything*. The house, he imagined, must be worth half a million; the neighbourhood had become desirable over the years. He'd phone Sally tonight and tell her they no longer needed the family home; she and Ali could do up the cottage down the Cape. Winter-ize it.

'That wasn't so bad, was it?' Holly said when she returned to his office.

The blinds were now opened: light. The window: a soft breeze. The band was still playing, but it was still summer and he still couldn't see through the trees. He'd gotten up and was standing in front of the window. Holly's reflection showed her approach from behind him.

'It's our turn now, if you still want me?' she said.

Her breath was sticky on the back of his neck. She put her arms around his waist and was unbuttoning his jeans. Outside his window, the speed of light was breaking through the trees.

But then there was the boy he'd forgotten about, who he hadn't thought another thought about since he'd left him to sleep it off in the hammock that swung on the

porch of McConickle – Hey Jude, running around and around the building, head jerking and swivelling as he searched for Chas in a window.

‘I can’t get in! The door’s locked! I can’t get in! Professor Hanson! Can you hear me? Professor Hanson!’

‘Is that the boy from the hammock?’ Holly said.

When Hey Jude spotted Chas, an awkward run turned into an awkward skip, like something gangly and newborn. The boy waved and then waved some more; he jumped up and down with his black bag of knives slung across his body. He ran around the house again. He banged on the front door.

‘Professor Hanson, the door’s locked! I can’t get in!’

Chas drew the blinds. He shut the window. He stood hunched behind the wall, past his desk, out of sight.

‘Do you know him?’ Holly said.

‘Professor Hanson, I have something to tell you! I have something to tell you!’ the boy yelled up at him. The window was closed but still Chas could hear every word.

‘Mrs. Hanson still loves you!’ the boy said, ‘She told my mother she still loves you! Can you hear me? She still loves you!’ the boy yelled.

And then – where there wasn’t an open window, where there wasn’t an open door – there was.

And then there was.